

The Origin of Single Immersion.

JAMES QUINTER, *Dear Brother*:—I desire to present a few historical questions, respecting the ORIGIN and *practice of single immersion*, which I hope you will think proper to answer, and throw as much light upon the subject as the case demands:

1. Chrysostom—the most profound ancient Greek scholar who ever lived—says (A. D. 398): “Christ delivered to his disciples one baptism, in three immersions of the body, when he said to them, ‘Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’” *

2. Dr. Wall says: “The way of trine immersion, or plunging the head of the person three times into the water, was the general practice of all antiquity.” †

3. The practice of trine immersion prevailed, in the west as well as in the east, till the fourth council of Toledo, which, acting under the advice of Gregory the Great, in order to settle some disputes which had arisen, decreed that henceforth only one immersion should be used in baptism; and from that time the practice of only one immersion gradually became general throughout the western or Latin church.” ‡

From the above premises we draw the following conclusion: Christ delivered to his disciples one baptism, in three immersions of the body, which was the general practice of all antiquity, and prevailed in the West as well as in the East, till the fourth council of Toledo (A. D. 633), when it gradually gave way in the West, to its rival—single immersion. This conclusion, predicated upon the above premises, gives rise to the following list of important historical questions:

1. When was single immersion invented?
2. Whom by?
3. What gave rise to its invention?
4. With what favor did its inventor and origin meet?

* Bingham's *Antiquities of the Christian Church*, Book XI, Chap. XI, Sec. 7.

† *History of Infant Baptism*, Vol. II, p. 419.

‡ *Hinton's History of Baptism*, p. 158.

5. Was it in the name of the Trinity, or the Lord Jesus only?

6. When and where was the *backward* action in single immersion first introduced?

Your investigation and answer to the above will much favor your brother in the Lord,

* * *

Query 1. When was Single Immersion Invented?

Answer:—The following historical testimonies attribute the introduction of single immersion to Eunomius: Chrystal, in his book entitled, *History of the Modes of Baptism*, quotes Theodoret, Bishop of Cyprus, an author of an ecclesiastical history and various other works, and who lived in the latter part of the fourth and the early part of the fifth century, as follows: "He (Eunomius) subverted the law of holy baptism, which had been handed down from the beginning from the Lord, and from the apostles, and made a contrary law, asserting that it was not necessary to immerse the candidate for baptism thrice, nor to mention the names of the Trinity, but to immerse once only into the death of Christ." (p. 78.) The following is the language of Sozomon in regard to the origin of single immersion. It occurs in his *Ecclesiastical History*. He lived, according to Cave about the year A. D. 440. "Some say that Eunomius was the first who dared to bring forward the notion that the divine baptism ought to be administered by a single immersion; and to corrupt the tradition that has been handed down from the apostles, and which is still observed by all (or among all). * * But whether it was Eunomius or any other person who first introduced heretical opinions concerning baptism, it seems to me, that such innovators, whoever they may have been, were alone in danger, according to their own representation, of quitting this life without having received the rite of holy baptism; for if, after having received baptism according to the ancient mode of the church (*i. e.*, by trine immersion),

they found it impossible to reconfer it on themselves, it must be admitted that they introduced a practice to which they had not themselves submitted, and thus undertook to administer to others what had never been administered to themselves, (*i. e.*, single immersion unto the death of Christ). The absurdity of this assumption is manifest from their own confession; for they admit that those who have not received the rite of baptism, have not the power of administering it. Now, according to their opinion, those who have not received the rite of baptism in conformity with their mode of administration (*i. e.*, single immersion), are unbaptized; and they confirm this opinion by their practice, inasmuch as they rebaptize (*i. e.*, by single immersion) all those who join their sect, although previously baptized (*i. e.*, by trine immersion) by the Catholic church." (*Chrystal's History of the Modes of Baptism*, p. 78.)

It appears, then, from the writings of those authors, *Theodoret* and *Sozomen*, who wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries, that it was *Eunomius*, who introduced single immersion, and that it was an innovation upon the apostolic practice. *Bingham*, in speaking of trine immersion, as the primitive mode of immersion, says: "And the *Eunomians*, who first rejected this (*i. e.*, trine immersion), are condemned by *Theodoret* and *Sozomen* as making a new law of baptism, not only against the practice, but against the general rule and tradition of the Church." (*Antiquities of the Christian Church*, Book II, chap. II.) According to *Dr. Lardner*, *Eunomius* was ordained bishop of *Cyzicus* in the year 360, and died about the year 384. (*Lardner's Works*, Vol. 2, p. 315.) Then, as *Eunomius* lived in the fourth century, and as it was he, according to the historical testimonies above quoted, who introduced single immersion, it was introduced in the fourth century.

Query 2. Whom By?

Answer.—By Eunomius. See the historical testimonials under the answer to the first question.

Query 3. What gave Rise to its Invention?

Answer.—The following circumstances led to the introduction of single immersion, according to Bingham: "The Arians in Spain, not being of the sect of the Eunomians, continued for many years to baptize with three immersions; but then they abused this ceremony to a very perverse end, to patronize their error about the Son and the Holy Ghost's being of a different nature or essence from the Father; for they made three immersions to denote a difference or degrees of Divinity in the three divine persons; to oppose whose wicked doctrine, and that they might not seem to symbolize with them in any practice that might give encouragement to it, some Catholics began to leave off the trine immersion, as savoring of Arianism, and took up the single immersion in opposition to them." (*Antiquities of the Christian Church*, Book II, ch. 11, Sec. 8.) Such is Bingham's account of the introduction of single immersion. Wall, in his *History of Infant Baptism*, gives the same reasons. (Vol. 2, pp. 423, 424.) Bingham, in referring to the fourth council of Toledo, held about the year 653, which justified the change made in baptism from trine to single immersion, and for the reasons already named, further remarks: "Some learned persons find fault with this council for changing this ancient custom upon so slight a reason as that of Arians using it; which, if it were any reason, would hold as well against a single immersion, because the Eunomians, a baser sect of the Arians, were the first inventors of that practice. And, therefore, the exception made by the Spanish council in the seventh century, can not prejudice the more ancient

and general practice, which, as Strabo observed, still prevailed after this council; and, if Vossius says true, the trine immersion, or what corresponds to it, the trine aspersion, is the general practice of all the churches upon the earth at this day.

Query 4. With what Favor did its Inventor and Origin meet?

Answer.—It appears that single immersion did not meet with much favor for many years after its introduction, or before the Reformation. In our last quotation from Bingham, in answer to query third, Strabo and Vossius are named, and they are the “learned persons” who found fault with the council of Toledo for changing from trine to single immersion for the reason upon which the change was made. Strabo lived in the eighth, and Vossius in the sixteenth century. It will be noticed in our last quotation from Bingham, that Vossius is represented as saying that trine immersion, or trine aspersion, was the general practice of all the churches upon earth in his day. From this we must infer that single immersion had not many advocates in the time of Vossius. But we shall give a paragraph from Wall’s *History of Infant Baptism*, Vol. 2, p. 424. Dr. Wall is noticing the change from trine to single immersion, and remarks as follows: “The school-men among the Papists, though they say either way may do, yet speak of trine immersion, where immersion is used, as much the more fitting. And for Protestants Vossius says, ‘*What son of the church will not willingly hold to that custom which the ancient church practiced all over the world, except in Spain, etc.? Besides, at present the trine immersion is used in all countries; so that the custom can not be changed without an affectation of novelty and scandal given to the weak.*’ He means all countries where immersion is used.” We put the quotation by Vossius in italics that it may be more read-

ily distinguished from Wall. In the paragraph preceding the one above quoted, Dr. Wall uses the following language: "So the Spaniards kept to the use of one immersion for some time. For forty years after (after its introduction), it is confirmed in one of their councils. But Walafridus Strabo says that after a while '*the old way* (trine immersion) *prevailed.*'" We have put Strabo's language in italics. He lived and wrote in the eighth century. We see that, according to the above historical testimonies, single immersion prevailed to a very limited extent in Europe before the Reformation. And in Asia, the birthplace of Christianity, it was practiced but very little, if at all.

Query 5. Was it in the Name of the Trinity, or in the Name of the Lord Jesus only?

Answer.—It appears, when a change was made from trine to single immersion, there was also a change made in the words used. We have seen that the Eunomians introduced the single immersion. Socrates, a writer of the fourth century, in his "*Ecclesiastical History*," says, when noticing the errors of the Eunomians, "I shall merely observe that they adulterated baptism; for instead of baptizing in the name of the Trinity, they baptize into the death of Christ." (Book 5, ch. 24.) Pelagius, Bishop of Rome, in the sixth century, says: "There are many who say that they baptize in the name of Christ alone, and by a single immersion. But the Gospel command, which was given by God himself and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, reminds us that we should administer holy baptism to every one in the name of the Trinity and by trine immersion; for our Lord said to his disciples, 'Go, baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'" (*Chrystal's History of the Modes of Baptism*, p. 80.)

The fiftieth Apostolic Canon reads as follows: "If any bishop or presbyter do not perform three immersions of one initiation, but one immersion which is given into the death of Christ, let him be deposed: for the Lord did not say, 'Baptize into my death,' but, 'Go ye, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' Do ye, therefore, O bishops, immerse thrice into the name of one Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, according to the will of Christ by the Spirit." It does not appear that the ancients performed single immersion according to the language of the commission. It was done either into the death of Christ or in his name only.

Query 6. When and Where was the Backward Action in Single Immersion first Introduced?

Answer.—Robinson, in his *History of Baptism*, has the following: "The first English Baptists, when they read the phrase *buried* in baptism, instantly thought of *English* burial, and therefore baptized by laying the body in the form of burying in their own country; but they might have observed that Paul wrote to Romans, and that Romans did not bury, but burn, the dead, and buried nothing of the dead but their ashes; so that no fair reasoning on the form of baptizing can be drawn from the mode of burying the dead in England." (Pp. 500, 501.) The same author, in the same work, has the following: "The Baptists profess to baptize according to the rules of the New Testament, and, by requiring a personal profession of faith, and by dipping the whole person in water, they seem to act consistently. The very plain manner in which they baptize is a high degree of probability in their favor; but they appear to have varied a little from the original form, which, however, the free constitution of their

churches allows them any day to alter. There is no pattern in Scripture for singing at the administration, unless singing be reputed, as it very well may be in some compositions, a mode of praying or praising God. They baptize transversely, by laying a person down backward under water; but this is a method troublesome and inconvenient to some people, especially to such administrators as are not so tall as the candidates; and it requires more time, if not more strength, than in some cases can be afforded." (Pp. 496, 497.)

Dr. Judson, in his *Address on the Mode of Baptism*, has the following: "All the Baptists in the world who have sprung from the English Baptists, have practiced the backward posture. But from the beginning it was not so. In the apostolic times the administrator placed his right hand on the head of the candidate, who then, under the pressure of the administrator's hand, bowed forward, aided by the genuflection which instinctively comes to one's aid, when attempting to bow in that position, until his head was submerged, and then rose by his own effort." (*Judson on Baptism*, pp. 112, 113.) The backward action, then, seems to have been introduced by the English Baptists. And if it has been introduced by them, it has been introduced since the Reformation.

Our correspondent requested us to give historical answers to his questions. We have done so and we hope they may have their proper influence in helping to form a correct view of the proper mode of Christian immersion.

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